UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.6/1994/6
28 February 1994

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN
New York, thirty-eighth session
7-18 March 1994
Item 4 of the provisional agenda*

MONITORING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NAIROBI FORWARD-LOOKING STRATEGIES FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

Situation of and assistance to Palestinian women

Note by the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

In its resolution 1993/15, entitled "Situation of and assistance to Palestinian women", the Economic and Social Council requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Commission on the Status of Women at its thirty-eighth session a report on the implementation of the resolution, containing recommendations and a programme of action aimed at improving the condition of Palestinian women under Israeli occupation. The report describes how, in the context of rapid political change, the concern of the Commission on the Status of Women about the situation of Palestinian women and children may be entering a new phase.

* E/CN.6/1994/1.

94-10044 (E) 020394 07/03/94

/...

CONTENTS

	Paragraphs	Page
INTRODUCTION	1 - 9	3
I. THE SITUATION OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN WITH RESPECT TO GENERAL LIVING CONDITIONS	10 - 19	5
II. IMPACT OF THE MIDDLE-EAST PEACE AGREEMENT ON PALESTINIAN WOMEN	20 - 24	8

INTRODUCTION

1. In its resolution 1993/15, the Economic and Social Council requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Commission on the Status of Women at its thirty-eighth session a report on the implementation of the resolution, containing recommendations and a programme of action aimed at improving the condition of Palestinian women under Israeli occupation. The report should use all available sources of information, including missions of experts to the occupied territory.

2. Reports on the subject had been submitted regularly to the Commission, most recently at its thirty-seventh session, based on findings of various documents published by the United Nations and a number of publications from other sources. In 1989, a fact-finding mission had examined the situation of Palestinian women living outside the occupied territory and had interviewed women from the occupied territory. In 1993, missions of experts to the occupied Palestinian territory as requested in Council resolution 1993/15, could not take place in view of the changing political situation.

3. It has consistently been emphasized that, in preparing reports on Palestinian women and children for the Commission on the Status of Women, political matters were considered to fall outside the competence of the report. There has been general recognition, however, that the lives of Palestinian women in the occupied Palestinian territory are conditioned by the complex political reality in the region. The status of women of all ages had been profoundly affected by the political consequences of the occupation. Like previous reports submitted to the Commission on the Status of Women, the present report describes the situation of women in the critical areas of family life, economy and employment, education and health, with special attention to psychological well-being.

4. The report is based on various recent documents published by the United Nations and other sources, most of which do not yet take into account recent political developments. An effort has been made to seek out information about how the situation of women and children has evolved since September 1993. It should be noted that, despite the considerable documentation published on the Palestinian conflict, there is a lack of reliable statistics on the status of women, health, housing conditions, labour force participation, household composition and education. For example, population data on the occupied Palestinian territory are based on a census conducted in 1967 that has been updated annually. The figures may well underestimate the population by 10-15 per cent because of underreporting at the time of the census and underestimation of births and infant deaths. To obtain additional information, the present report has drawn on sample surveys which have been conducted recently in the occupied Palestinian territory.

5. The signing of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements by the Governments of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in September 1993 (A/48/486-S/26560, annex) has transformed the political perspective of the region and has affected the future situation of women and children in the occupied territory. As repeatedly stated by the

General Assembly, the question of Palestine was at the core of the Middle East conflict, and peace in the region should be based on a comprehensive, just and lasting solution, under United Nations auspices. The peace process would of course have an impact on all the women in the region. During the period in which the present report was prepared, the details of the Declaration of Principles, in particular the specific understandings and agreements set out in the Agreed Minutes, were still being negotiated. There has been a rush to define strategies for economic development during the interim period and afterwards by all partners concerned, including bilateral and multilateral donors.

6. In this context of rapid political change, the concern of the Commission on the Status of Women about the situation of Palestinian women and children may be entering a new phase. The forthcoming establishment, for a transitional period, of a Palestinian interim self-government authority and elected council for the Palestinian people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip implies a shift of focus. In addition to monitoring the living conditions of Palestinian women and children, the authority will emphasize the enhancement of women's participation in the elaboration of a permanent settlement of the conflict and the integration of a gender perspective in all areas of legislation, infrastructure, human resource and economic development.

7. The rapidity of events has made it impossible for the present report to contain the requested recommendations and programme of action. They will have to await the outcome of the political developments that are now occurring.

8. This change of focus is taking place at a moment when the attention of the Commission on the Status of Women is drawn to preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) and the second review and appraisal of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies. At the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace (Nairobi, 1985), the issue of Palestinian women and children was a main area of concern under the rubric "peace", as reflected in paragraph 260 of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies:

> "For more than three decades, Palestinian women had faced difficult living conditions in camps and outside, struggling for the survival of their families and the survival of the Palestinian people who were deprived of their ancestral lands and denies the inalienable rights to return to their homes and property, their right to self-determination, national independence and sovereignty. ... The special and immediate needs of Palestinian women and children should be identified and appropriate provisions made. United Nations projects should be initiated to help women in the fields of health, education, and vocational training. Their living conditions inside and outside the occupied territory should be studied by the appropriate United Nations units and agencies, assisted, as appropriate, by specialized research institutions from various regions." 1/

9. In light of the recent political developments, monitoring the implementation of paragraph 260 of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies has gained new momentum. The second review and appraisal of the Forward-looking Strategies should acknowledge the progress achieved and identify the remaining

obstacles. In the preparation of the report on the review and appraisal for presentation at the Fourth World Conference, all changes that have affected the situation of Palestinian women and children will have to be carefully investigated and taken into account. This will certainly be a concern of the Western Asia Regional Preparatory Conference, which will be convened in Amman from 6 to 10 November 1994.

I. THE SITUATION OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN WITH RESPECT TO GENERAL LIVING CONDITIONS

10. According to the information available, the situation of Palestinian women in the occupied territory is still characterized by the state of military occupation. In the period under investigation, living conditions drastically worsened - in particular during the first half of 1993. Despite the positive developments and increased hope for peace after the signing of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, no substantive or immediate improvement of living conditions could be reported.

11. The continuation of the occupation, buttressed by armed force, affected Palestinian society and its livelihood and resulted in serious human rights violations. In fact, during 1993 the number of total fatalities and injuries, particularly among children, was significantly higher than during the preceding period. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) reported that security forces were responsible for the death of 80 Palestinians from the West Bank, including 8 children and 120 persons from the Gaza Strip, among them 28 children. 2/ Since the beginning of the intifadah the total number of Palestinian casualties by shooting, beating or tear gas had risen to 1,240 by August 1993, and the total number injured to an estimated 130,000. Approximately one fourth of the fatalities continued to be children under 16 years. 3/ Palestinian women had similarly experienced violence and maltreatment caused by the situation of unrest and armed conflict. In Gaza, 722 women reported serious injuries and had to undergo medical treatment, as did 108 women in the West Bank. Eight of 48 women prisoners suffering from injuries and maltreatment were said to have been denied adequate medical treatment. During the reporting period, a total of nine Palestinian females were reported to have been killed as a result of direct or indirect actions of the Israeli security forces and settlers, among them three schoolgirls aged below 13 years and one 4-year-old girl.

12. Women and their families had been increasingly harassed - in particular when persons declared as "wanted" had been pursued. Military assaults were carried out massively against the homes of fugitives in February and April 1993 in the Gaza Strip, rendering hundreds of Palestinians homeless. Since the beginning of the intifadah, over 2,400 homes had been demolished or sealed. 4/ Women and their children were especially affected by measures of collective punishment. The Israeli-ordered closure of the Gaza Strip on 30 March and the West Bank on 31 March 1993 had a serious impact on the daily life and overall economic conditions of Palestinians, because it divided the occupied territory into four isolated regions. Special permits were required for entry into Jerusalem and Israel and travel between the West Bank and Gaza and within the West Bank itself. This had a negative effect on commerce, medical care,

education and access to services, including those provided by UNRWA, and it caused unemployment to rise to over 50 per cent. 5/ Gaining access to medical facilities in Jerusalem necessitated permits and ambulances were refused entry in several emergency cases. In some areas, road blocks had created enclaves, depriving the Palestinians living in them of access to their families, places of work, schools, medical facilities, places of worship in Jerusalem and utility services. 6/ The closures resulted in a substantial rise in socio-economic hardship since some 130,000 Palestinians were suddenly cut off from their sources of income. Palestinians began to liquidate savings and sell personal belongings and household appliances to buy food, pay debts and cover rent. A change in consumption patterns and nutritional habits was noticed. There was concern that the percentage of growth-retarded children under three years of age and the number of child deaths could rise since protein-energy malnutrition was closely associated with infant and child mortality. 7/

13. A rapid worsening of the environmental situation in the occupied Palestinian territory has been noted. As reported by UNRWA, the ecological problems stemmed mostly from the over-exploitation by the Israeli authorities and the settlers of the available water resources, the lack of adequate waste management systems and the destruction of thousands of olive and fruit trees. The contamination and degradation of the environment had reached crisis dimensions in the Gaza Strip and presented a direct health threat to the population - in particular to the children. Palestinian households suffered from the poor condition of water distribution networks and considerable water losses. 8/ According to a recent survey, household indoor standards have remained relatively poor. Only approximately half the households in the West Bank camps and villages had a separate bathroom and inside flush toilets. Not even 10 per cent had fitted kitchens. 9/ Poor standards and scarcity of safe water affected women in particular since it has been their role to manage food preparation and hygiene.

14. The life of Palestinian families has been characterized by frequent separations. The absence of male family members due to detention, expulsion, imprisonment or death has increased the number of female-headed households. Over the past year, there were an estimated 12,000 Palestinian political prisoners held in Israeli prisons and detention camps. Deportations of male political activists had continued. The number of female-headed households had always been high among the Palestinian refugee population, since men tended to leave the camps in search of work. Thus, the camp population consisted in the beginning mainly of women, children and the elderly. Women were the backbone of refugee camp life. According to UNRWA data, 30.6 per cent of households in the refugee population in the West Bank and 20.1 per cent in the Gaza Strip were female-headed. UNRWA reported that 22 per cent of the families that qualified for the "special hardship" programme were headed by women. An analysis of the population of the occupied territory by age structure and sex showed large gender gaps for the age groups from 35 to 64 years, where women outnumbered men - in particular for the age groups 40-44, 45-49, and 50-54 years. 10/ Men of the concerned age groups migrated from the occupied territory in search of employment abroad, while women stayed behind. Family reunification laws had also led to the deportation of family members, including children, and have denied them the right to return on a permanent basis. Children had even been denied registration. In December 1992, the Government of Israel granted

renewable visitor permits to the non-resident spouses and children of Palestinians carrying Israeli-issued identification cards. This decision affected about 1,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children who had entered the occupied territory on visitor permits in mid-1992. 11/

15. Female-headed households were particularly vulnerable to poverty, since women traditionally depended on men as providers of family income. The majority of women could not ensure a living for their families since they were impeded by lack of education, vocational training, skills and employment opportunities and were subject to socio-cultural restrictions concerning their freedom of movement. The condition of widows was particularly difficult and has not received sufficient attention in relation to the question of de jure headship, property rights and guardianship of the children. Certain customary practices, such as a widow's marrying her husband's brother or other close kin, were still widespread in the occupied territory. Large age gaps between spouses, which are common in Palestinian society and in countries of the region, have increased the likelihood of a woman being widowed, often at a young age. Social and legal pressures often force single women and their children to join the household of their kin and to give up independent living in the absence of a male head of family.

16. In Palestinian society, marriage determines a woman's life in social and economic terms. Marriage status has an impact on access to property and income and freedom of movement. Age at marriage is an indicator of women's education and expected fertility. A recent survey carried out in the West Bank and Gaza found that during the first period of the intifadah the age at marriage fell. In the previous two decades education and urbanization had led to a relative rise in marriage age. Thirty-seven per cent of the female population married under the age of 17, the legal minimum age required for marriage. The reasons for the increase in early marriages were said to be linked to the long term school closures and the deteriorating economic situation, which discouraged parents from continuing their daughters' education. The bans on wedding parties during the intifadah made weddings affordable for those who had not planned to marry for some time because of the costs involved. Furthermore, parents fearing for the lives of their sons encouraged early marriages since the loss was considered less tragic if the victim left behind a male heir.

17. According to a recent survey a relatively high number of women in the age group 30-39 were not married (17 per cent). Given the fact that marriage was less likely in the Palestinian society once a women reached her thirties, this figure is important. It might imply that a certain number of women in this age group either chose not to marry or did not have an opportunity to do so. It confirmed the assertion that higher education might be counterproductive and an impediment to marriage. A greater percentage of the non-married women of this age group had a higher educational level and worked outside the home. 12/

18. Women experience the severe restrictions on movement within their communities which were imposed by the Israeli authorities on a daily basis, just as men do. Prolonged curfews and the fear of going out in the evening have profoundly affected the social life of Palestinian society. However, freedom of movement for women is also linked to marital status and age. It was considered indecent behaviour for a woman to be alone with a male non-family member.

Unmarried women are more restricted in their movements than married women of all ages, although freedom of movement increases steadily with age. Seventy-six per cent of women aged 50-59 said that they were free to move at will, but only 22 per cent of the 15-19-year-old young women said so. Only 71 per cent of women working outside the home felt free to move about freely. 13/

19. Despite the political and social changes that had occurred, the legal conditions governing the status of women had not been changed since the occupation of the West Bank in 1967. All the legislative, executive and administrative powers previously held by the Government of Jordan in the West Bank and Government of Egypt in the Gaza Strip were transferred to the General Military Commander and remained unchanged, unless modified by a provision from the Israeli Military Commander. Legislation relating to the status of women remained the same, with two exceptions. The law of personal status is governed by religious courts, which remain entirely outside the powers of the Israeli military authorities. This religiously based legislation is similar to laws in Israel and neighbouring Arab States and has had an important impact on issues affecting women and families. The second change concerns women's voting rights and candidacy rights for municipal posts, which was granted by Military Order 627 of 1976. Women had no right to vote under the 1955 Jordanian electoral law. The only occasion when women could vote was in the municipal elections of 1976; municipal elections were banned afterwards. 14/

II. IMPACT OF THE MIDDLE-EAST PEACE AGREEMENT ON PALESTINIAN WOMEN

20. The implementation of the Declaration of Principles will have an impact on the situation of Palestinian women. With political developments entering a new phase, the concerns of Palestinian women can be considered part of the development agenda. A women-specific agenda, similar to that of various developing countries, seems desirable. The prevailing approaches to "women in development" are either to add women's concerns to the development agenda set by others or to transform development agendas on the basis of women's analysis of what would both meet their basic needs and empower them. Donors and development agencies have an important role to play in the implementation of women-in-development policies. But little can be achieved without the active involvement of all concerned at all levels.

21. The process of structuring new governmental institutions and the capabilities to manage them will be taking place with the transfer of certain administrative responsibilities from the Israeli civil administration to Palestinian control. Palestinian women can bring a gender perspective to these developments. All of the areas mentioned in the Agreement, starting from direct, free and general elections for the council of Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to human resource development, environmental protection and cooperation in the field of communication and media, can benefit from the scrutiny of women for their gender components and impact. Development projects in agriculture, the setting up of infrastructure, housing, education and health facilities can best be elaborated with the participation of female experts. At

the outset, however, a particularly important step would be the provision of de jure equality for women.

22. It is clear that Palestinian women are aware of the present challenge. The Palestinian Federation of Women's Action called for constitutional and judicial legislation to ensure equality and equal opportunities and confirmed the continuation of its struggle against the economic, social, political and cultural marginalization of women. It recognized the urgency of the need to have equality enshrined in the constitutional declaration of the national authority. Women's participation in the drafting of laws, regulations and legislature of the new national authority and in community life in all its aspects needed to be guaranteed. The Federation also asked for the participation of leading female professionals in the formation of the transitional national government and a larger proportion of women in principal and subsidiary organizations and institutions dealing with social, economic, educational, administrative and other matters. Their request covered civil rights, education, health provision, the planning and implementation of growth and development, and the media.

23. The question of accountability takes on a specific definition in the case of interim self-government arrangements which will have an impact on future developments and governmental structures. Adequate funds and resources should be given to women-in-development programmes and women-in-development personnel of sufficient authority should be included in all policy, planning and programming activities. Appropriate quantitative and qualitative national targets need to be identified. A national machinery for the advancement of Palestinian women is already in place but needs recognition, authority and influence at the highest political level. Women need to participate in future governance structures and in existing development institutions, and most importantly, need to be involved in the formulation of development strategies. Skills-training and gender-awareness are important tools for achieving these goals.

24. Besides providing adequate health services and improved education, the most important programme will be to enhance the development of sustainable income-generation activities for women. Realistic, feasible possibilities and basic support facilities need to be identified. Palestinian women need support from the international community, non-governmental organizations and donor agencies in this respect.

Notes

1/ Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, Nairobi, 15-26 July 1985 (United Nations Publication, Sales No. E.85.IV.10).

2/ "Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East" (A/48/13), para. 16.

3/ "Report of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People" (A/48/35), para. 22.

4/ Ibid., para. 24.

5/ "Assistance to the Palestinian people" (A/48/183/Add.1, E/1993/74/Add.1), para. 25.

6/ A/48/35, para. 28.

7/ A/48/13, para. 10.

8/ Ibid., p. 44.

9/ Marianne Heiberg and Geir Øvensen, Palestinian Society in Gaza, West Bank and Arab Jerusalem. A Survey of Living Conditions. Report 151 (Oslo, Fagbevegegelsens Senter, for Forskning (FAFO), 1993), p. 88.

10/ "Selected statistical series on the balance of payments, foreign trade, population, labour force and employment of the occupied Palestinian territory, West Bank and Gaza Strip, 1968-1987" (UNCTAD/DSD/SEU/1) table DP/III/4A.

11/ A/48/13, para. 2.

12/ Heiberg and Øvensen, Ibid., pp. 287-288.

13/ Ibid., p. 301.

14/ "Palestinian women and economic and social development" (UNCTAD/DSD/SEU/Misc.4), paras. 29-33.